EDWARD THOMAS

ESSAYS OF TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

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ESSAYS OF
TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

EDWARD THOMAS

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THERE is a certain wistfulness about the work of Edward Thomas which differentiates it from that of most writers who have essayed to reveal the beauty and significance of Nature. His choice of subjects indicates this sufficiently: a solitary child gathering a posy, the death of a favourite dog, falling rain, the pathos surrounding a deserted house—these are among the pictures which Thomas gives us with a descriptive power that is strong by reason of its reserve and quietness. He excelled in all the finer shades. No one could give more sure expression to the peculiar mingling of smiles and tears that makes up an April day.

So when, in 1917, we heard the news that he had fallen in action we knew that we had lost a skilful interpreter of Nature in her most intimate moods. We hardly realized at that time that we had lost also a poet. It is true that his writing had been the very stuff of poetry, but the poems which came to us almost with the news of his death showed that he was able to fire a cool and patient observation with fine feeling and crystallize the ecstasy of an exalted moment in verse. As for the man himself, it is sufficient to record that W. H. Hudson spoke of him as "my friend and one of the most lovable beings I have ever known." Edward Thomas was born in 1878, and received his education at St Paul's School and Oxford.

Thanks are due to Mrs Thomas and to Messrs Gerald Duckworth and Co., Ltd., for permission to

reprint "The Flower-gatherer" and "The Stile," from *Light and Twilight*; "Mike," "Aunt Ann's Cottage," and "The Moon," from *Cloud Castle and Other Papers*; "Rain" and "Hengest," from *Rose Acre Papers*; and "The Fountain," from *Rest and Unrest*.

F. H. P.

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THE FLOWER-GATHERER

Herself a fairer flower.—MILTON

SO strong was the young beauty of the year, it might have seemed at its height were it not that each day it grew stronger. The new day excelled the one that was past, only to be outshone by the next. Day after day the sun poured out a great light and heat and joy over the earth and the delicately clouded sky. The south wind flowed in a river straight from the sun itself, and divided the fresh leaves with never-ceasing noise of amorous and joyful motion. So mighty was the sun that the miles of pale new foliage shimmered mistily like snow, yet each leaf was cool and moist with youth, and the voices of the birds creeping and fluttering among the branches were as the souls of that coolness and moistness and youth. If one moment the myriad forms of life and happiness intoxicated the delighted senses, at another a glimpse of the broad mild land stretched out below, and of the sun ruling it in the blue above, gave also a calm and a celestial dignity and simplicity to the whole. One after another the pools, the rivers, and rivulets, the windows or glass roofs of the vale, caught the sun and sparkled as if Vega and Gemma and Arcturus and Sirius and Aldebaran and Algol had fallen among the meadows and woods.

On some days the sense of oneness, of wide power and splendour uniting earth and sky, of infinite simplicity, triumphed. On others the spirit was content to bathe and half lose itself in numbers, exuberance, complexity,

in the odours and colours and forms, one by one, in the rich rising flood of the grass, in the hurrying to and fro of preparation that was nevertheless not overmuch troubled about the end.

The children seemed to be trying to gather all the flowers. It was their way of striving to grasp the infinite. They were scattered over the hillside, where the pale sward was made an airy or liquid substance by the innumerable cowslips nodding upon its surface, as upon a lake, that held their small shadows each quite clear. All day they gathered flowers, and threw them away, and gathered more, and still there were no less. The earth continued to murmur with blissful ease, as if, like the wandering humble-bee, it were drowsed with the warmth and the abundance.

One child separated herself from the rest, moving down instead of across or up the hill. Often she went on her knees among the flowers, with bent eyes that saw only the hundreds close at hand. But from time to time she raised her head, her delicately browned and yet more rosy face, her gleamy hair, that was as pale as barley on her temples but elsewhere golden brown as wheat, her round and calm yet lively eyes, her restless happy lips—and looked steadily for a moment at the whole of earth and sky, and grew solemn, only to return to the other pleasure of the hundred cowslips just at her feet, the crystal and emerald wings among them, the pearly snails, the daisies, and the chips of chalk like daisies. Tighter grew her hand round the swelling bunch. She slipped; the flowers fell, and not all were picked up again; and so there was yet room for bluebells when she reached the wood below. In the moister fields still lower there were kingcups of gold and cuckoo-

flowers pink and white, looking as if they had fluttered down from the sky; and for these also a place had to be found. The stitchworts of a hedgeside lured and piloted her to the hollow, hardly larger than a great hall, where a brook ran straight, for once in its life.

By the slow stream forget-me-nots made a continuous haze on either bank. She was now quite alone, under the old cherry-tree of the forsaken garden at the water's edge. Six or eight huge crooked branches rising out of the rocky trunk bore up a dome that was all flowers. They were in rounded clusters as of bubbling snow, and close as honeycomb. The lovely freckled white smelt bitter and sweet at once. The flowers hummed with bees, and between the clusters were streaks and wedges of the blue. The child looked up suddenly at this glorious roof, and her smile of surprise passed into what would have been indifference, because the blossoms were inaccessible, if she had not caught sight of the forget-me-nots when the flight of a cuckoo that had been calling out of the cherry-tree carried her eyes away to where he skimmed the water. He did not fly far, nor cease to call while he was flying, or when he was seated on one of the alders by the brook. She looked at him as she was plucking the forget-me-nots. This narrow hollow was his room, she thought. Yet it was full of other songs. There were blackbirds hidden in the hazels, or clearly defined against the may-flower or the bronzed flowering oaks. Thrushes talked and called out to her a hundred times: "Did she do it? Did she do it? Did she? Did she? She did, she did!" and she laughed. A swallow flew over his image in the water as if about to dive in after it, and then rose up and curved away. Smaller unfamiliar birds sang rillets and

minute cascades of hurrying song. The gold-crest repeated a tune like the unwinding of a tiny sweetly creaking winch, like the well-winch at home. But the lazy cuckoo was lord of all.

Now she had filled both hands, and each time she grasped a new stalk some of the old fell out. So presently she laid them down in the grass to rearrange them. But she now noticed the tall sedges of the brook and wanted some. She looked round to see if anyone could see her doing this forbidden thing, and then went to the edge and stretched out her hand: they were too far. The water was gliding under her, flashing like brandished steel, and yet as clear as air over the green stars of its bed. Everything had always been kind to her, and this water was one of the kindest, so playful and bright, so pure that sometimes they came far to fetch some of it in a pail for the house. She leaned out, and even moved one foot as if to step towards the green sedge. She lost her footing and fell, not quite reaching the blades as she splashed. She was scolded for getting wet, but never much, and she used to laugh as they were dressing her in fresh clothes; and to-day it was so warm. . . . It was an adventure. But her hair was all wet; she did not like that: and the water, though so pure, was not pleasant in mouth, nostrils, eyes, and ears, nor could she get rid of it. Her hands touched the green stars; she could see them; but the sky was gone. She was surprised, indignant, anxious to be out. Why this cruelty? It was not a game to go on like this. She was angry . . . terrified . . . numbed. She could see nothing but water, she heard, smelt, breathed, tasted, touched water everywhere. Who could have done it? Something is cruel! . . . Why? . . . She could not bear

it. No! No! Where were her flowers? Where was her mother?

She rose up a little, and saw the sun, and the cuckoo on the branch through the waves, and heard the man calling to his horses in the next field. Then solitude: all pleasure gone, love, light, warmth, movement was nothing, was over there, was past, or never had been, would never be again. It was better now. Sleep, sleep. But in the sleep, songs, visions of the house, forms and faces moving to and fro, and herself going in and out amongst them, far away, long ago, over there, in that other place. She was hurrying faster and faster, running too fast for her legs, carried away off them into the air, but swaying and rising easily and more easily now. She sighed as she seemed to float higher and lighter into soft darkness, into utter darkness, into nothing at all, where there was never anything or will be anything. The mud settled down. The stream flowed clear and sweet. The sun had not so much to do but that he could wilt the flowers lying on the bank. Life went on exuberant, joyous, august, looking neither to the right nor to the left. The cuckoo called. The birds' songs became so drowsy that they were not missed when they ceased, and only its own echo replied to the cuckoo. The child's white forehead was just above the water, and a fly perched on it and preened his diamond wings. A quarter of a mile away the dinner-bell at home was swung merrily again and again by a strong arm that enjoyed the task.

From "Light and Twilight"

MIKE

FOR two or three years it had begun to be assumed, and the probability even mentioned aloud, that Mike would some day die. Not that there was any evidence that would bear sifting by one who was intimate with him. He was strong and hearty, and never had any wretchedness except when I threw a stick at him in anger. Looking back, we could say that his life's thread was spun " round and full out of their softest and whitest wool " by the Fates. He could still walk as far as ever. If I travelled twenty or thirty miles over the Downs he would walk and run two or three times as far. For he was nearly always hunting at full speed, visible or audible half a mile away, or he was examining every inch of the path, seeking an excuse to be off; and if that was not to be found he would look up to see whether I was thinking or otherwise inattentive to him, and then, his thievish thighs endued suddenly with all the wolf, he was off at his best speed which no shout could stop. In the rapture of the hunt his bark became a song, but as a rule it was hard and explosive.

Seven years before, when he became mine for five shillings—he was a stray—I used in my ignorance to beat him for hunting. Never having thought about it, I took it for granted that the habit was bad because dangerous and forbidden, and also a piece of wantonness and defiant self-indulgence. I did not cure him; I did not even make him dislike me; and therefore I began to laugh at the folly of lashing myself into a fury at the vice of disobedience under the pretext of improving the

morals of an excellent dog. He forgave me so readily that it took some time for me to forgive myself. And so for seven years not a day passed but he hunted, and many were his whole nights spent in the woods. It was he who discovered for me that a partridge is eatable in May. He had no evil conscience by nature or from me, and so was often superficially unwise in choosing his bird; he would make his leap into the hedge where the partridge lay when the landlord was only a few seconds distant. But I learnt that there is a Providence watching over such simple wants. However much the pheasant screamed as it flew a few yards and then dropped with fear to run certain other yards before the dog, no harm came except to the bird; as the glade rang with screams of alarm and yelps of delight I tried to look as if Mike was not mine; the keeper was beneficently detained or deaf.

He was a magically fortunate dog, and it was foreordained that however boldly he might be leaping through a wood, he was always to alight with his four feet clear of traps. Wire nooses he often ran into, and many a hare and rabbit he must have saved by first entering a snare intended for them and then freeing himself by force of subtlety, returning sometimes with the wire and its peg still fastened on his leg as an inconvenient decoration. As he hunted in his first year so he did when the judicial minds, who knew nothing of him except what they believe to be common to all dogs, began to aver that he was getting old, with a kind of smile that one so mighty and so much vaunted should be giving way before them. They pointed out that he was silvering everywhere, that his head was almost pure white, that he lay dozing long after the house was astir;

but I could see no real reason for believing that this change might not go on, as the phrase is, "for ever," and then when he was all silver he might have another life as a silver dog. So with his teeth. It was evident that the fangs which held on to a stick while humorists swung him giddily round and round were now very much shorter (I concede this), but still they held on; he ate as well as ever; he drew blood from the enemy as before. If a stump was as useful as the polished and pointed fang, why should not the bare gum of the hero be equal to the stump?

Gradually I got into the frame of mind which was no longer violently hostile to the proposition that one day Mike would die. But this did not affect my faith; it was an intellectual position with no influence on life.

He was no ordinary dog. That, the sceptics tell me, goes without saying: they argue that because all people regard their favourite dogs as extraordinary, therefore all, including Mike, are ordinary and will turn white, lose their teeth, and die. In the main he was an Irish terrier. But his hair was longer than it "should have been," and paler and softer. His face was more pointed than was right; his ears, darker than the rest of him and silky (so that a child once fell asleep sucking one), usually hung down. His hindquarters approached those of a collie. Also his tail when he trotted along curled over his back and made children laugh aloud; but when he was thinking about the chase it hung in a horizontal bow; when stealing away or in full cry it was held slightly lower and no longer bent, and it flowed finely into the curves of his great speed. He was eloquent; his yawn alone, or the twitching of his eyebrows as he lay with head between extended paws, expressed a score

of shades of emotion. He was very excitable, very tender-hearted, very pugnacious. He was a rough, swift dog, yellowish-brown above and almost white beneath, who was here, there, and everywhere at once, importunate, yet usually welcome and always forgiven. He would attack any dog of equal or greater size, and test the magnanimity of the mastiff and the churlishness of curs running behind carriers' carts. But if a little dog attacked him he lifted up his head, fixed his eyes on me, and looked neither to left nor right, but muttered: "You are neither dog nor cat; go away." As for a mouse, he thought it a kind of beetle, and was curious but kind. He would, however, kill wasps, baring his teeth to avoid the sting and snapping many times before the dividing blow.

I should like to be able to say that he had no tricks. The most splendid array of tricks only gives colour to the vulgar notion that a dog is, as it were, a human being *manqué*, a kind of pitiable amusing creature unfortunately denied the gifts of Smith and Brown. But this loud-voiced dog of violent ways, who leaped through a window unscathed, this fighter, this hunter, had been taught one trick before I had him: he would beg when commanded, but unwillingly and badly. The postman, cobbler, and parish clerk, a little wizened philosopher, would never let him beg for the lump of sugar which he carried as a daily gift: "I would never beg myself," he said, "and I don't like to see a noble animal beg neither." As for faults, I think he had them all, the faults, that is, which human beings call such in dogs—abruptness, invariable vivacity, the appetites . . .; they merged charmingly into his other qualities; isolated, they looked like faults, but good and

bad together swelled the energy, courage, and affection of his character. Wondering wherein lay my superiority to Mike, I found that it was in my power to send him out of the room—as it lay in Alfonso's power to shackle Tasso.

Once in his life he became, for one hour, a lapdog. A child had just been born in the house. In the evening all was very still and silent; strangers flitted up and down stairs and along passages; Mike's mistress was not to be seen as she lay motionless in bed, but from her side came cries which he had never before heard—therefore he leapt up into my lap and would not move for an hour. Seldom did he do a thing which harmonized so well with those soft brown eyes in a face that was all eyebrows.

So long as he was out of doors he was inexhaustible, and he took every opportunity of trying his strength by hunting, racing to and fro, and asking even strangers (with head on one side, eyes expectant, forelegs stamping as he alternately retreated slowly and leapt forward) to throw him a stick or stone. Perhaps it was in this expectant attitude that he looked his best, every limb braced, his steps firm and delicate as he tripped backward obliquely, his ears erect, his mouth open, and white teeth, flame-like tongue, and brown eyes gleaming together as he repeated his commanding bark. "What a nice piece of lean bacon it would make," said a child, looking at his tongue. He fought with every inch of his body, and his movements were no more to be followed than those of a wheel. His fury and alacrity never ceased until intervention ended the fight, however long. And as profound as his energy was his repose. After a fight or a night in the wood he showed

no fatigue until he was indoors. Then he fell flat on his side and slept with quiverings and snuffling yaps; and even then anyone's movement of preparation for going out discovered a new fount of activity, and he was up and had burst out of the door before the latch was released.

When he was at least ten years old and looked very white slipping through the beeches and troubling the loves of the foxes under a full moon I confess that even I used sometimes to say that I hoped he would die in full career with a charge of shot in his brain. He never began to grow stout, and was never pampered; it could not be thought of that he should come down to lying in the sun and taking quiet walks of a mile or so, and living on pity and memory and medicine, though memory, I think, he would have been spared. Better far that, if he had to make an end, one of the keepers (a good shot) should help him to it in the middle of his hunting. That would have been a fortunate death, as deaths go.

But he did not die. He forced himself through a dense hedge of blackthorn, came out combed and fine, stood hesitating among the first celandines, and was off after a hare. He never came back. If he could not bolt out of this world into a better, where there is hunting for ever, yet with his head on one side, ears cocked, eyes bright, he would not be refused entrance by any quadruped janitor of Paradise. But then we do not know what stage the belief in a future life has reached among dogs, and whatever the dogmas, heresies, scientific doctrines (that the fleshly dog manifestly does not survive, etc.), they doubtless have no power to influence the law and lawgiver, which are unknown to those it most nearly concerns. I only hope Mike is—

or, rather, I wish he were—somehow, still hunting. There seems no reason why he should not go on for ever.

I tried to believe that each one of the Cleeve houses had a canary, or a book, or piece of furniture, or an Irish terrier, to slip a kind of a soul in among its walls—that is in the case of houses not occupied by persons whom Christianity or Maeterlinck has gifted with souls.

From "Cloud Castle and Other Papers"

RAIN

THE prejudice of poets against water has perhaps kept rain out of fashion in literature. It is true that rain is among the subtle, anonymous *dramatis personæ* of *Lear*, and that Milton wove into the harmonies of melancholy "the minute-drops from off the eaves." Swift's famous "Shower" knocks somewhat grossly at the door. "There never was such a shower since Danae's" ran contemporary compliment. There is, too, an allusion to rain in *Childe Harold*, as a *pianissimo* accompaniment to storms. But it is characteristic of modern poetry, as a criticism of life by livers, that it has left the praise of rain to hop-farmers and of mud to shoeblacks. If literature were faithful to life there would have been a chorus of benedictions after the rain that whispered on the hansom window-panes and sent the grumbling Thames to sleep with soft hands, as we drove from the play on a midsummer night; the French Academy would have elected at least one member for his rendering of the meaning of sleet, during a grey and purple sunset over the coast of Brittany. Even at the fireside I am washed by rain until I seem to glimmer and rejoice like the white headstones on the hill!

It is falling now as I sit with paper-spoiling intention, and the sound brings back the rain that used to come from heaven on summer mornings at Oxford, while invisible cattle were lowing and doves cooing, and a distant bell was tolled: brings back the rain in a city street by night, that softened the sky to a deep blue

that was the very hue of mercy thrown over the awful darkness; and—gaily, daintily—the drops that came and went (like stars in a restless sky) on the fir-tree foliage as we came to the trout river, in sudden sunlight. Now it is near sunset. The blackbirds are singing lazily in the gardens. The traffic has ceased as if the silence had cried, "No thoroughfare." A Circean lady is playing Grieg. She could turn us into swine; that her quiet smile proclaims: she does for the time change into gods some of those who are sitting in the great blue apartment, half shadowed, as the expression fluctuates, tender, minatory, tumultuous, hypnotic, vast. Still the rain is falling, and the horse-chestnuts in the street expand, their leaves shine. Their size and beauty are as things newly acquired. Two especially that rise between distant groups of houses fill the whole space of sky—touch the stars; in a few minutes the constellations hang in their branches and swing as the trees are shaken. The rain has gone to their very hearts. They sigh tremulously as if the drops moved them with a tranquil joy. I could wish I were a horse-chestnut now. . . . In winter I have seen them made much of by the heavens, and, against the rainy blue, so vast as to touch the roof of the temple, like the Zeus of Pheidias, particularly when all day the shower has descended pensively and without wind. Then songs were hushed; the pools rocked only with smooth leaden waves. Before evening the rain had worked its spell. Thrushes' songs filled the hawthorns among the gorse. The wan grass was beautiful; but for a time the young blades were dominant, deep green with the depth of night, yet fresh with the freshness of day; black, dripping trees overhung the grass, and both had a colour

like that of hues and forms seen through water. All things smiled faintly so that I seemed to touch the pericardium of eternity. The slight melancholy and the great solemnity of the rain that had passed away entered the song of the robin.

Few pictures deal nobly with rain and mud. Yet in a great city what elvish effects they prepare! Coruscating, sadly but brilliantly, the mud gravely relieves the white faces and gaudy raiment that pass by night, and adds to the dreaminess of a scene, in which the pageant of life is like a strange flora to the eye. Of all the mud I have known, the most beautiful is that which is often to be seen on the bank of the Thames below Waterloo Bridge, lying like a crude monster, while the sunset is rosy and green and purple on its flanks, and two swans float and barges heave at rest; or while at dawn the city is all its own, a quiet grey city that has vanished when the mud has sunk below the tide.

One shower I remember that wrought magic in a London garden. A kind of judicious neglect by the owner had made the garden a kindly party to any unusual trick of the elements. On the lawn was a sundial that made Time an alluring toy. At the bottom of the garden, beyond the lawn, was an enclosed space of warm rank grasses, and, rising over them, a vapour of cow-parsley flowers. A white steam from the soil faintly misted the grass to the level of the tallest buttercups. Rain was falling, and the grasses and overhanging elm-trees seemed to be suffering for their quietness and loneliness, to be longing for something, as perhaps Eden also dropped "some natural tears" when left a void. A hot, not quite soothing, perfume crept over the lawn. All night I was haunted by those elms which appeared

as grey women in cloaks of that strange mist. For the time that garden was the loneliest place on earth, and I loved and feared its loneliness.

Of rain seen from indoors, falling on a broad rich land of grass and trees, or seen (from heavenly altitudes) falling on the grey and blue slates of a town, I dare not speak. But I have known the rain, hissing on the lawn, complete the luxury of tea at Oxford in November, when the heart is fresh from walking. There is a generous fire; seven-league slippers on the feet; hot buttered brown toast, and, as evening changes from grey to grey in quiet *crescendo*, still the rain.

In this London garden there was one day which I may not omit, for the rain that buried it said many things which I have copied.

The shadow of the lime-trees lay soft upon the grass, wonderfully soft because of the shy early sunlight. A bird sang such blithe notes as wakened the soul, disrobing it of the dishonours and disgusts of ages, restoring it to Paradise. From a corner of the garden I could see, over many steeples and chimneys, the side of a great wave of land, fledged with a few white cloudlets; and as yet I could not say whether these were of snow or blackthorn flowers. Fainter still, among distant trees, I saw a doubtful glimmer which might be the forward sweeping hem of vernal splendour. In such moments of doubt I have found the calendar's positive announcement of Spring a solace. A mist muffled the angles of the landscape, a mist where the whole force of Spring might lie in ambush. The sun had burnt for an hour like the fire of a thrifty candle. Presently it flushed (it almost crackled like a faggot) with a good-humoured lustihead. Then I knew that

in the grass the dewy charities of the south winds were beginning to tell, and that the haze had fostered that slumbrous warmth in which chaffinches love to sing. Through the grey air at first the sky was invisible, save a misted blue pane here and there appearing, and vanishing, and engrailed by the grey cloud. Some windows northward glowed. Something undefinable that was Spring's and Dawn's richly mounted everything; it entered the new stone church and gave it centuries backward and forward of glory and repose. Even the shadows on a dusty road were mysterious as shadow on deep water, and had an azure unknown before. And still the blackbirds sang:

> "High trololie lollie loe,
> High trololie lee.
> Tho' others think they have as much,
> Yet he that says so lies.
> Then come away,
> Turn country man with me."

A wind just lifted the coltsfoot down. Such a wind it was as brings to corners where the willow-wrens never wander a sound like the song of willow-wrens and all that their bland Southern voices mean among English trees. It comes in March from between the south and the east, and passes into the cold and odourless meadows, with the odour of all the flowers of the Orient and the sweetness of the sea.

My path lay between rows of houses that were hidden by almond flowers among black boughs. If I paused—and the wind dropped—I could just detect the reluctant savour of struggling green life. Then the 'lane' became the bordering road of a common. Here the sun was the genius of a company of haggard poplars

in whose branches it seemed to hang, and the paths are haunted by ghosts of divers faces—O Memory!

Tuis hic omnia plena
Muneribus.

One of these ghosts—the rain was beginning to hiss in the trees and patter on the dead leaves below—was of an old man who had played Edmund in his youth. Beaten by a slow mortal disease in his prime, he had lived happily in the midst of friends who never abated the services which his gracious feebleness exacted and made appear a duty. He who should have died first survived them all. His mind nodded and slept, leaving a childishness that was not happy. All the pleasant valetudinarian space disappeared from his memory; the tumultuous early days returned, and at intervals he strayed amidst the pageant in which the figures of Lear and Richard the Second towered with minatory pomp. For his part had ever been traitorous and base. The evil acted "in his days of nature" haunted him fearfully. In a great voice (so that he used to say: "I fear my mother hears me") he would repeat the speech of Lear: "Howl, howl, howl, howl! Oh, you are men of stones," as often as he had heard it when, as Edmund, he was borne off before the end: he seemed to whimper behind the stage, crying bitterly to be admitted to die before the King. Luckily, before his death all became dark. It was with surprise that I heard he was dead. For years he seemed not to have lived. . . .

Now the road went near several great houses, of a kind which rain makes eloquent. And the rain was falling then with a sound like the silence of a multitude. They were not the old, beautiful houses of London, but such as were built not more than sixty years ago

for some one grown suddenly rich. The old houses can always chatter of what has fallen from them by indiscreet neglect or foolish care, and all must regret the blotting of the little unnecessary trifles that were part of their nobility, like the grassy spaces between the garden wall and the public road, where the fowls paraded, and the ivy was plaited with periwinkle to the edge of the macadam. These middle-aged houses make no such appeal. They gibber in premature senility, between tragedy and comedy. Nobody will live there now; the gardens are feeble and disordered, and the dahlias fade one by one. Passers-by laugh at their 'style.' Even the creepers have taken no hold of the wall and have fallen dishevelled. I do not believe the former occupants ever come a little way out of their path to see their house. Yonder, were the gaudy doors, and blinds still hanging; the romantic name on the folding gates; and I remembered the autumn rain in which they took heart. Each was the gloomier for the one lamp glimmering near the gate; the soiled crimson leaves were shaken out over the path; the starlings screamed mechanically; the bleared sunset was swallowed up in rain. And in that hour the house, once an anachronism, a mixture of parts of several incongruous styles, seemed to have grown very old, and against the wildly moving sky and stars it gained an indubitable style, that of Stonehenge and the mountain crag—the natural style, the immortal style of things too old.

Beyond these houses lay the Little House, and behind a high exclusive fence, a holly hedge, and a lawn. It was empty. Its orchards were praised almost as they deserved, its rent lowered, in advertisements; nobody

came. Yet the lawn was always green; a gardener—or who?—kept sharp the angles which it made with the drive. The crocuses came out and lasted till the west wind spilt their petals in the deep grass. The only sign of neglect was the temerity of the ivy, which crept through the chinks of the door, through the keyhole, into the letter-box.

The rooms could be dimly seen from without, especially the great shaded children's nursery that faced the north and has said to me as I have passed:

> "I know the secret of the unhappiness of childhood. A Fate abides with me and through her I know the laws that mingle with the roses of life the lilies of death. I have made festal days awful. Many a sad dreamer curses the shadows that he used to see falling on my walls in early firelight."

And it continued until I wished for a Blakesmoor where I could quiet my alarms. As a rule, there was no hint of mysterious inhabitants. The emptiness was far more mysterious. It was wonderful to see how wild the garden looked after a short desertion—not disordered or weedy, but wild—though the flowers were of the daintiest and most elaborate kinds. Years ago I heard some one playing the *Didone abandonnata* in the Little House, and in the garden the echoes struck something that repeats them still

To us, as children, it used to be a famous day when a new tenant came to this house. We had a cruel standard of fitness to apply to whomsoever came. Best of all we liked the ancient who lived in one room of it, kept no servants, put up no curtains, and in fact left the house exactly as we wished. We used to hear him singing in a cheerful rasping voice under the big cedar

when he thought no one was near. When he quitted it, sitting among his furniture in an open cart, we implored him to stay. For a time we were alternately sorry and pleased at the emptiness of the house. We used to save our pocket-money continuously for whole months, to buy the freehold. And so we came to have a sense of possession, if not of occupation, which (we thought) was stronger because it was not known. To the sequestered Sylvans, whose escaping footsteps were heard in very early morning, we prayed:

> "Be present aye with favourable feet
> And all profane audience far remove."

So intimate we grew that the garden seemed to understand us. I would that I could understand it in return.

On spring days—like this—when a grass scent came into the streets as if the fields and woods were insurgent, near at hand, it was to the garden we went, counted daffodils and lime leaves, listening for the new-come martins that sang before they were seen, in the dark. In these early visits we found more in the garden than was in the articles of sale. So we hated the rhododendrons that were planted by a later tenant. He took an interest in the garden that was horrible; frivolous music was played in the house. Nevertheless, in spite of the laughter, the splendour, and the glossy carriage, the house had a defiant air, hating the young gods and goddesses that supplanted the Olympians it once knew. All its peers in the neighbourhood had given way to villas; I thought that perchance it was time for the Little House to go. At evening the thought grew stronger; the house itself cried:

> "Now mark me how I will undo myself."

It went on:

"God pardon all oaths that are broke to me,"

as if perhaps it knew that I had been vain enough to think I could have lived there happily, as if it cared for the foolish ritual of my sorrow. If it were destroyed no one could assail my ownership. I might be content. *Car il en est toujours qu'on peut aimer.* . . . Yet I am not sure that I would have possessed it actually. One day two of us were looking over the gate gathering honey with our eyes, when a gracious little girl came smiling towards us; we slunk away. A little later she surprised us on tiptoe at the same place, and at her invitation we entered the garden for the first time. We were persuaded to sit down near the lilacs. But we did not look round; left alone for a moment, we planned an escape. Even when she came out with a tray and sat beside us we were not happy. I remember that we whispered together, and the child laughed and tried to put us at our ease. My friend said with a voice of discovery: "They have tea here." We were near disillusion; only, we did not know!

I have said there was a common next to the house. The garden was more ours than that. Independence commonly means a state in which we never know on whom we depend; the term common was false, and those who walked on it knew no such liberty as we. The garden belonged to us as truly as the world to the children who in a great library colour the globe red, green, and blue, for Mary, Arthur, and Dick. On the common there were "strange fetters to the feet, strange manacles to the hands." If any should wonder at this let them go to the garden at evening. A half-moon is alone in the sky. Is it green or is it white? Here and

there clusters of poplars vein the horizon. At that hour the waving trees are as delicate as grasses. Some windows are lit. Here a song is ending; there a door is violently shut; but already London is growing silent. The sounds are so faint that if I pause to listen and unravel them I can hear my heart, the ticking of my watch, but not the enormous city. Go to the garden and see, in the shadow of a cedar, the apple-blossom glow.

From "Rose Acre Papers"

AUNT ANN'S COTTAGE

TWO of us were walking together and talking nearly all the time, just as things occurred to our minds which were at rest in beautiful weather.

"Since we passed that white house behind the cedars," I laughed, "we have wandered from Gwithavon, the pure British name of a river in Essex, to a fishmonger's advertisement in the Battersea Park Road. Such are the operations of the majestic intellect. What do you think? Do you suppose the cave-men were very different, except that they can seldom have troubled about philology and would probably have eaten their philologers, and they did without fishmongers because fish were caught to eat and not to sell?"

"Well?" said Jones. "I dare say what we have in common with the cave-men is what most helps us to go on living except in so far as we are fishmongers and philologers. Scratch a philologer and you will find a sort of cave-man."

"Yes: but isn't it a little disconcerting to think that two men who have been to one of our ancient universities should zigzag in this fashion? I think that to prove our self-respect we ought to go soberly back on our footsteps and see what sort of a pattern we made while we were in charge of the cave-men's god."

"All right; but let it be simply for fun. It is a game I am very well used to. When we were children my brother and I used to be sent to chapel to represent our parents, who got up too late. After dinner we were put into a room to write down the main points of the

sermon. My young brother, who was destined, as you know, to be an atheist and a statistician, could do this perfectly well, and I could copy from him by right of primogeniture. For I, on the other hand, never heard more than a sentence at a time, and for that matter if I go to a public meeting nowadays to please a lady I never hear more than that. The difference is that now I am bored and impatient with myself and the lady for putting me into a foolish position, whereas nothing was more delightful than the half-hour during which my brother listened to the sermon and I went wool-gathering. . . . I don't know who the original wool-gatherers were, but I always think they must have been uncommercial men whose task it was to wander over the mountains and be beforehand with the nesting birds, gathering from rock and thorn the locks of wool left by the sheep, a task that must take them into many a wild new place without overburdening them with wool or profit or applause at the end of the day. . . . While my brother was writing out the skeleton sermon, I used to wander backward over the windings of my chapel wool-gathering and of course strike out again here and there to right or left after more wool and more thorn and rock.

"The preacher was a mild, tall man, with a mane of curling black hair, clean-shaven, long white face, thin exquisitely formed lips, and a rich voice that murmured in a quiet musing manner that enchanted me so much that I was soon in a state of half dream. The light was dim as with gold dust. It was warm. The people around were soporific, too: I imagined them to be asleep and I alone awake, and my first steps had something of the thrill one feels in stealing out of a silent

house at dawn. I listened to the preacher's voice and fixed my half-closed eyes on the ash-tree just outside one of the windows on the south side. As a rule, the text alone was a sufficient portal to my wanderings. Alas! of all of them I can recall only one, and that because at the end of the sermon the preacher was seized with a fit of sneezing and I felt a slight pang because I finished my ramble at this painful moment. It was not at all an extraordinary wool-gathering, though.

"The text was the three verses in the first chapter of Genesis that describe the work of creation on the fifth day. In that musing way, as if he were oblivious of all but his ideas, which made me really fond of him, the preacher murmured: 'Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly upon the earth in the open firmament of heaven.'

"That was enough. For me it was all the sermon. I saw at once a coast of red crags and a black sea that was white far below me where the waves got lost in the long corridors between the crags. The moon, newly formed to rule the night, stood full and large and white at the top of the arch of the sky that was black as the sea and without a cloud. And out of the waters were rising by twos and threes, but sometimes in multitudes like a cloud, the birds who were to fly in the open firmament of heaven. Sea-birds with long white wings spread wide emerged singly out of the black, and paused on the surface and let their wings rise up like the sides of a lyre, and then skimming low this way and that rose up in circles at last and screamed around the moon. Several had only risen a little way when they fell back

into the sea and vanished, and these I supposed were destined to be deprived by the divine purpose of their wings and to become fish. Eagles as red as the encircling crags came up also, but they were always solitary and they ascended as upon a whirlwind in one or two long spirals, and blackening the moon for a moment they disappeared. The little birds that sing were usually born in cloudlets, white and yellow and dappled and blue, and, after hovering uncertainly at no great height, made for the crags, where they perched above the white foam and twittered in concert or, straying apart, sang shrill or soft and low or in stormy luxuriance after their own kind. And ever and anon the flocks of those who had soared now floated downward across the moon and went over my head with necks outstretched and crying towards the mountains and moors and pools or sloped still lower and alighted and sailed on the waters, where they screamed each time the black surface yawned at a new birth of white or many-coloured wings. Very soon the sea was chequered from shore to horizon with birds, and the sky was heaving continually with others, so that the moon could be seen either not at all or in slits and wedges, and the crags were covered, as if with moss and leaves, with birds, chiefly those that sing, and they mingled their voices as if in a dawn of May.

"At a word from the preacher creeping in upon me, I forgot about the fifth day of the Creation, but not about the birds, and, as it was then February, I thought chiefly about their nests and eggs. I went over in my mind the different kinds I had taken the year before. They were all in one long box procured from the village shop where it used to hold bottles of cheapest scent.

I had not troubled to arrange them, and in the chapel I saw the confusion of the moorhen's and coot's big freckled eggs, and between these, often in double layers, the blue and the white and the olive, the spotted, the blotched, and the scrawled eggs. For a minute I forgot the eggs by thinking of a poem I had begun to copy out and had laid away with the eggs. It was the first poem I had ever read for my own pleasure several times, and I had begun to copy it in my best handwriting, the capitals in red ink. I had got as far as 'Some mute inglorious Milton here may . . .' I tried to repeat the verses but could not, and so I returned to the eggs. I thought of the April past and the April to come, when I should once more butt my way through thickets of perpendicular and stiff and bristling stems, through brier and thorn and bramble in the double hedges; I would find the thrushes' nests in a certain oak and blackthorn copse where the birds used hardly anything but moss, and you could see them far away among the dark branches which seldom had many leaves but were furred over with lichens. I would go to all those little ponds shadowed by hazels close to the farms, where there was likely to be a solitary moorhen's home, and up into the pollard willow which used to have four starling's eggs at the bottom of a long narrow pocket. In all those spring days I had no aim but finding nests, and if I was not scrambling in a wood I walked with my head lifted up to the trees or turned aside to the hedges or bent down to the grass and undergrowth. I was not in the least curious about the eggs, or any question of numbers or variation in size, shape, or colour. Sun, rain, wind, deep mud, water over the boots and knees, scratches to arms and legs and face,

dust in the eyes, fear of gamekeepers and farmers, excitement, dizziness, weariness, all were expressed by the plain or marked eggs in the scent box; they were all I had and I valued them in the same way and for the same reason as the athlete valued the parsley crown. I recalled the winning of this one and that, repenting sometimes that I had taken more than I should have done from the same nest, sometimes that I had not taken as many as would have been excusable: also, I blushed with annoyance because I had never revisited certain nests which were unfinished or empty when I discovered them—what a pity, perhaps the ploughboy robbed them completely. How careless the country boys were, putting them in their hats and forgetting all about them, often breaking them wantonly. I envied them their opportunities and despised them for taking them as a matter of course.

"I thought of the flowers I trampled over and the smell and the taste of the cowslips and primroses and various leaves and the young brier-stems chewed and spat out again as I walked. I began to count up the Sundays that must go before there would be any chance of finding rooks' eggs. And that reminded me of the rookery in the half-dozen elms of a farmhouse home-field close by the best fishing-place of all. The arrow-headed reeds grew in thick beds here and there and the water looked extraordinarily mysterious just this side of them, as if it might contain fabulous fish. Only last season I had left my line out there while I slipped through the neighbouring hedge to look for a reed-bunting's nest, and when I returned I had to pull in an empty line which the monster had gnawed through and escaped with hooks and bait. It was just there between

the beds of arrowhead and that immense water-dock on the brink: I vowed to try again. Everybody had seen the monster or at least the swirl he made as he struck out into the deeps at a passing tread. 'As long as my arm, I dare say,' said the carter, and cracked his whip emphatically, with a suggestion that the fish was not to be caught by me. Well, we shall see.

"As usual, the idea of fishing was connected with my Aunt Ann. There was none worth speaking of unless we stayed with her in our holidays. I often saw persons fishing, who certainly did not stay with her and probably would not have known of her if she was mentioned, but they never caught anything. The way their floats swam had not the right look. Now, I could have enjoyed fishing by those arrowheads without a bait, so fishy did it look, especially on Sundays when no fishing was allowed: it was unbearable to see that look and have no rod or line."

"Yes," I interrupted, "that fascinating look is quite indescribable, and I can quite understand how

> Simple Simon went a-fishing
> For to catch a whale,
> But all the water he had got
> Was in his mother's pail.

I have seen that look in tiny ponds and fished in one simply on the strength of it and against popular advice, but gave it up because I caught newts continually and nothing else. Do you know, when I lifted them up out of that strange water I shuddered and felt as if I were being punished by a spirit of the pond?"

"I have the same feeling about eels and never fish a second time where I have caught one: their twisting is utterly abandoned and unmingled protest and agony,

and I feel that if men did not think, even so would they writhe in pain or grief.

"To my wool-gathering. In the chapel I could see that shadowed water by the reeds and the float in the midst. In fact, I always could see that picture in my mind. I liked the water best when it was quite smooth; the mystery was greater, and I used to think I caught more fish out of it in that state. I hoped it would be a still summer and very warm. It was nearly three-quarters of a year since I was there by the rookery meadow last—eight months since I last tasted my aunt's doughy cake! I could see her making it, first stoning the raisins, while the dough was rising in a pan by the fire; when she thought I was not looking she stoned them with her teeth, but I did not mind, and now I come to think of it they were very white teeth, so that I can't think why no man ever married her for them alone. I suppose she was too busy, making cakes and wiping the dough off her fingers, and wondering if we had got drowned in the river, to think about lovers. I am glad no man did marry her; I mean, I was glad then. For she would probably have given up making doughy cakes full of raisins and spice if she had married. She existed for that and for supplying us with lamb and mint sauce and rhubarb tart with cream when we came in from bird's-nesting. How dull it must be for her, thought I in the chapel, all alone there and the fishing over and no birds laying yet, no nephews and, therefore, I supposed, no doughy cakes, for she could not be so greedy as to make them only for herself. She lived all alone in a little cottage in a row at the edge of a village. Hers was an end house. The rest were very neat, but hers was hidden by ivy which grew

through the walls, up between the flagstones of the floor, and flapped in at the windows; it grew also over the panes, and was so dense that the mice ran up and down it, and you could see their pale silky bellies as they crossed the glass, if they did not look in over the sill and enter. The ivy was full of sparrows' nests, and it made the neighbours angry that she would not have them pulled out. We never thought of touching these nests, not if the neighbours' sons, who were acquaintances, suggested it. I wished I lived there always, always in a house covered with ivy, and kept by an aunt who baked and fried for you and tied up your cuts, and would clean half a hundred perchlings without a murmur, though at the end she had half covered her face and the windows with the flying scales. 'Why don't you catch two or three really big ones?' she said, sighing for weariness, but still smiling at us, and putting on her crafty-looking spectacles. 'Whew! if we could!' we said to one another: it seemed possible as we stood there, for she was a wonderful woman, and the house wonderful too—no anger, no sorrow, no fret, such a large fireplace, everything different from London and altogether better. The ticking of her three clocks was delicious, especially early in the morning as you lay awake, or when you got home tired, and it was twilight and no lamps. Everything had been like that in the house 'ever so long,' you could not tell how long; it was natural, like the trees; it was never stale; you never came down in the morning and felt you had done the same yesterday and would do the same tomorrow, as if each day was like a new badly written line in a copy-book, with the same senseless, dismal words at the head of the page. Why couldn't we always

live there? There was no chapel for us. Sunday was not the day of grim dullness when everybody was set free from work, only to show that he or she did not know what to do or not to do; if they had been chained slaves they could not have been stiffer or more grim.

"In my fancy these adult people were a different race: I had no thought that I should become like that, and I laughed without a pang. How different my aunt, with her face serene, kind, notwithstanding that she was bustling about all day and had trodden down her heels and let her hair break out into horns and wisps. I thought of the race of women and girls. I thought (with a little pity) they were very much nicer than men, thought more of you and were kinder. I would rather be a man, I mused, and yet I was sure women were better. I would not give up my right to be a man some day, but for the present there was no comparison between the two in my affections; there was not a man I should have missed. Odd things the women did, though. They always wore gloves when they went out, for example. Now, if I put on gloves it was almost as bad as putting a handkerchief over my eyes, or cotton-wool in my ears. They picked flowers with gloved hands. Certainly they had their weaknesses. But think of the different ways of giving an apple A man caused it to pass into your hands in a way that made it annoying to give thanks. A woman gave herself with it, and it was as if the apple was part of her, and you took it away and ate it, sitting alone very peacefully and thinking of nothing. A boy threw it at you as if he wanted to knock your teeth out, and, of course, you threw it back at him again with the same intent. A girl gave it so that you wanted to give it

back, if you were not somehow afraid. I thought of three girls who lived near my aunt, and would do anything I wanted, as if it was not I but they who wanted it. Perhaps it was. Perhaps they wanted nothing except to give. Well, and that was rather stupid, too.

"There the preacher's voice must have half released me from the spell, and I turned to a dozen things, as what o'clock it was, whether one of my pigeons would have laid its second egg when I got home, and how many I should have altogether in a year's time, whether Monday's post would bring a letter from a friend who was in Kent, going about the woods with a gamekeeper who gave him squirrels, stoats, jays, magpies, an owl, and once a woodcock to skin. I recalled the sweet smell of the squirrels; it was abominable to kill them, but I liked skinning them. I went over the increasing row of books on my shelf. First came *The Compleat Angler*, the thought of which gave me a brief entry into an indefinite alluring world of men rising early in the mornings and catching many fish, and talking to milkmaids who had sung songs with beautiful voices, and using strange baits. I wish I could say now how that book (a very poor edition) shut up between its gilded covers a different, embalmed, enchanted life without any care, from which life I emerged with the words 'as wholesome as a pearch of Rhine,' which recalled actual perch swimming in clear water in the green streets of the ponds on sunny days. Then there were Scott's poems, a book which then only meant a vision of armed men rising suddenly out of heather and rocks on a mountain-side, and a fierce, plaided chief exclaiming:

'And, Saxon, I am Roderick Dhu.'

"Next *Robinson Crusoe*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *The Iliad*, and a mass of almost babyish books, tattered and now untouched, but strictly preserved; and lastly, *The Adventures of King Arthur and the Round Table*. As I reached this book, 'Inexorable man,' I heard the Lady of the Lake say to Merlin, 'thy powers are resistless'; moonlit waters overhung by mountains and castles on their crags, boats with a dark, mysterious freight; knights trampling and glittering; sorceries, battles, dragons, kings, and maidens, stormed or flitted through my mind, some only as words and phrases learnt by heart, some as pictures. It was a delicious but shadowy entertainment, with an indefinable quality of remoteness tinged by the pale moonshine and the cold lake that finally suggested the reward and solid comfort of tea at my aunt's house, and thick slices, 'cut ugly,' of her doughy cake.

"Processions of living people, these also partly in words and partly in pictures, passed through my mind. They were faces peering above bundles of clothes, but some crying out for clearer recognition by means of tones of voice, decided and often repeated expressions of all the features acting together, and producing the effect which was their soul. They came up to me for judgment. Most I sent quickly away; others I stopped and, like a schoolmaster, compelled them to recite some chance word or deed of theirs tarrying in my memory. On they came, and I became conscious of the numbers at that moment surrounding me in the chapel seat. I looked at them and grew afraid of their silent solitude, and tried to keep myself distinct yet felt myself melting into the mass when the preacher quoted the words:

He liveth best who loveth best
All creatures great and small.

What he went on to say was lost. I looked at the people to see what they would do. The preacher said the words majestically, and I supposed them to be true. I was sorry for those squirrels which the gamekeeper shot, but I wanted to have their skins: with all these others I thought it must be different. They had listened to the sermon, they came to listen, and probably to learn and follow the true. I was expecting them to get up and go out, and show that they loved something very small, like an ant or fly. At that moment a small moth alighted on my knee, and I watched it creep and flutter up my leg to my shoulder. I did not feel that I loved it. The moth flew on to the upper part of a man's sleeve in front of me. He scarcely moved his head, but I knew he had seen the flight; he lifted his hand slowly, dropped it swiftly on the moth, whose scales powdered his coat, and then became rigid again. Evidently the words were not believed to be true. Why did poets say so many things that people seemed to like and did not believe? I wondered. But what if they were true, after all? I resolved to go on with my copying of Gray's *Elegy* that very afternoon, also not to collect moths. It entered my head that my aunt was merciless to mice; it was a grave objection, for she was to me the corner-stone of the universe. Here the sermon ended with a sneeze. I was very sorry for the preacher, but I fear I did not love him. As to moths, I never became a collector."

"What a very consistent wool-gathering," said I; "I don't suppose the sermon was more so. And did you notice it was all pictorial? I'll be bound you don't

go wool-gathering in that fashion now, and if the child is so much superior to us how much more the cave-man may have been!"

"Except that I don't believe any cave-man ever had such an aunt as mine. There can have been no superfluous good women in those days, born simply to delight their sisters' and brothers' boys."

"And now let us set out for Gwithavon!"

From "Cloud Castle and Other Papers"

THE STILE

THREE roads meet in the midst of a little green without a house or the sign of one, and at one edge there is an oak copse with untrimmed hedges. One road goes east, another west, and the other north; southward goes a path known chiefly to lovers, and the stile which transfers them to it from the rushy turf is at a corner of the copse.

The country is low, rich in grass and small streams, mazily subdivided by crooked hedgerows, with here and there tall oaks in broken lines or, round the farm-houses, in musing protective clusters. It is walled in by hills on every side, the higher ones bare, the lower furred with trees, and so nearly level is it that, from any part of it, all these walls of hills and their attendant clouds can be seen.

I have known the copse well for years. It holds an acre of oaks two or three generations old, the roots of ancient ones, and an undergrowth of hazel and brier which is nearly hidden by the high thorn hedge.

One day I stopped by the stile at the corner to say good-bye to a friend who had walked thus far with me. It was about half an hour after the sunset of a dry, hot day among the many wet ones in that July. We had been talking easily and warmly together, in such a way that there was no knowing whose was any one thought, because we were in electrical contact and each leapt to complete the other's words, just as if some poet had chosen to use the form of an eclogue and had made us the two shepherds who were to utter his mind through

our dialogue. When he spoke I had already the same thing in the same words to express. When either of us spoke we were saying what we could not have said to any other man at any other time.

But as we reached the stile our tongues and our steps ceased together, and I was instantly aware of the silence through which our walking and talking had drawn a thin line up to this point. We had been going on without looking at one another in the twilight. Now we were face to face. We wished to go on speaking but could not. My eyes wandered to the rippled outline of the dark heavy hills against the sky, which was now pale and barred with the grey ribs of a delicate sunset. High up I saw Gemma; I even began trying to make out the bent star bow of which it is the centre. I saw the plain, now a vague dark sea of trees and hedges, where lay my homeward path. Again I looked at the face near me, and one of us said:

"The weather looks a little more settled."

The other replied: "I think it does."

I bent my head and tapped the toe of my shoe with my stick, wishing to speak, wishing to go, but aware of a strong unknown power which made speech impossible and yet was not violent enough to detach me altogether and at once from the man standing there. Again my gaze wandered dallying to the hills—to the sky and the increase of stars—the darkness of the next hedge—the rushy green, the pale roads and the faint thicket mist that was starred with glow-worms. The scent of the honeysuckles and all those hedges was in the moist air. Now and then a few unexpected, startled, and startling words were spoken, and the silence drank them up as the sea drinks a few tears. But always my

roving eyes returned from the sky, the hills, the plain to those other greenish eyes in the dusk, and then with a growing sense of rest and love to the copse waiting there, its indefinite cloud of leaves and branches and, above that, the outline of oak-tops against the sky. It was very near. It was still, sombre, silent. It was vague and unfamiliar. I had forgotten that it was a copse and one that I had often seen before. White roses like mouths penetrated the mass of the hedge.

I found myself saying "Good-bye." I heard the word 'good-bye' spoken. It was a signal not of a parting but of a uniting. In spite of the unwillingness to be silent with my friend a moment before, a deep ease and confidence was mine underneath that unrest. I took one or two steps to the stile and, instead of crossing it I leaned upon the gate at one side. The confidence and ease deepened and darkened as if I also were like that still, sombre cloud that had been a copse, under the pale sky that was light without shedding light. I did not disturb the dark rest and beauty of the earth which had ceased to be ponderous, hard matter and had become itself cloudy or, as it is when the mind thinks of it, spiritual stuff, so that the glow-worms shone through it as stars through clouds. I found myself running without weariness or heaviness of the limbs through the soaked overhanging grass. I knew that I was more than the something which had been looking out all that day upon the visible earth and thinking and speaking and tasting friendship. Somewhere—close at hand in that rosy thicket or far off beyond the ribs of sunset—I was gathered up with an immortal company, where I and poet and lover and flower and cloud and star were equals, as all the little

leaves were equal ruffling before the gusts, or sleeping and carved out of the silentness. And in that company I had learned that I am something which no fortune can touch, whether I be soon to die or long years away. Things will happen which will trample and pierce, but I shall go on, something that is here and there like the wind, something unconquerable, something not to be separated from the dark earth and the light sky, a strong citizen of infinity and eternity. The confidence and ease had become a deep joy; I knew that I could not do without the Infinite, nor the Infinite without me.

From "Light and Twilight"

HENGEST: A KENTISH STUDY

HENGEST is a gardener of Kent, whom I first met when amber was lingering in the maple leaves of a long past autumn. He looks as if he might have conquered worlds; in fact, he has chosen to conquer the individualities of flowers and to leave no Roman peace amongst them; and in the last of the decades that are given to us, or perhaps the first which we have to wrest for ourselves, he admits that he has failed. Standing hardly six feet high, he looks a great rather than a big man. He bends—he has been bending all his life—with a gracious stoop that also expresses craft and eagerness to move, as of a runner crouching at the start. His hair and beard are furze-brushes; the large, quiet eyes are like sweet birds hiding therein. His chest is so ample that to see him walking reminds me of the verse: "The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs." Yet he has spent all that part of life which he cares to talk about in growing columbines and wistaria, in providing for sweet-williams and tea-roses. His gardening always seems an infinite condescension. I wonder how he can forbear to crush with his craggy hand the little plants that are so often recalcitrant. Alexander the Great listening to music, or Cæsar playing at love, would not give a more perfect picture of repose than Hengest watering the tender Malabar nut or culling garden seeds on a choice August eventide. With his great eyes, too, he is something of a natural poet. Yet I think the magnificent "overhanging firmament," the white immobile or flying clouds, and the glorious path of sun and moon,

impress him very lightly. I could never persuade him to take such delight in the silver and gold of a summer twilight as he obviously takes in pruning jessamine late in March, turning his back upon a league of awful woods set amidst delicate fields. Notwithstanding, he will talk of simple garden things and of his own countryside, with a sort of dignified, intimate knowledge, as if verily he were Groom of the Stole to Nature's self. I have sometimes made far-off and, as it were, purposely ill-aimed hints, that flowers were rather small deer for a man of his style. His replies are worthy of a Hengest who is content to be called "Ichabod Larkin, Florist" —with the letters all reversed by the hamlet artist, who has never realized that *d* becomes *b* when printed from a block. I gather that his subtle trafficking in trifles was originally of deliberate choice, and that the Hengest lies buried alive under the coat of Ichabod Larkin, as if it had had a tiny parchment label with a sonorous name tied to it, like the roses in the garden. He looks now a young man, though he has always in a sense been old, as most gardeners are perforce; for by a paradox of Nature, youth, that has the whole of life before it, cannot contemplate with equanimity the long years that are as a day's sun to the surface of a lawn or the grain of an oak. The old man, rather than the young man, can plant (and not water with tears) a tree that will never be glorious to his eyes. Hengest has resolved, as he explained in one of his replies, quoting almost his only author, not to be "busy in actions that were done under the sun, rather than those under the shade." I have been sceptical at times as to the complete ingenuousness of Hengest. Perhaps he has been harshly driven to his philosophy? I cannot say; but certainly there are rumours ever on the lips of his friends, and

there is an empty scabbard over the mantelpiece at his home, deceitfully draped by texts; there are a few brilliant buttons still to be seen amongst others on his drab coat. If it is so; if in the past he was a soldier of rank, still more is his bearing to be admired; and his humble services take on something of the pathos of that famous act of Charles V, who, after his resignation of an empire, called in vain for a servant to conduct an ambassador from his presence, and himself bore the candle out to the gate of the palace. If I throw out any hints on this point, he says that he would rather not be considered as the carcass of a fine gentleman. Then he falls back on his trenches. He speaks of a garden as of a microcosm, laughing to scorn the outsiders who count one flower like another. No two flowers are alike. Out of this knowledge he has gained a kind of charity towards flowers, and (I might say) a reverent humility. He has come to me, wringing his hands, to announce that a certain beautiful dahlia was proud and would not 'listen' to him. Even as to weeds, he early taught me the variety of their opposition, from the deep-rooted dock to which deliberate siege must be laid, to the speedwells that wage a guerilla warfare, and the traveller's joy that with its gallant flowers and plumy fruit is the light cavalry of the weeds. As some old Puritan or imaginative Welsh Calvinist would dwell upon the world of spirits until in every detail it became alive, splendid, and terrible, so, yet not solely in fancy, he has evolved a scheme of the universe of flowers, passionate, intelligent, enjoying, and suffering, but hard for the common eye to apprehend, because they are slow with a kind of abstract slowness. The result of his loving study is not in every way profitable. He lets time slip away; he seems to

deal in centuries and could find work which would wear out æons. Years ago he lost a comfortable post because he had spoiled all the gardenias by a too curious observation of the difference made by planting gladiolas (I think they were gladiolas) in their neighbourhood. But his best things are prodigious. Here again his head is at fault. He can only by extreme threats be lured to give up his finest flowers. Out of his own small cantel of the nursery he will sell nothing, and hardly ever give anything: it is therefore the astonishment of the countryside. To several artifices this remarkable perfection is ascribed. It is said, for example, that when he sees a peerless plant in his wanderings, he gathers a seed or two, and puts them in his pocket. There the seeds remain, until moist and well-favoured they sprout forth to the sun. Whatever their origin, these plants are even nearer than his pocket to his heart. When a fire once burnt house and garden, he was overwhelmed, until next spring the flowers came up near the ruins, sown by the flames where they were cruellest. Burnishing his days with patient labour, he has little need for other companions than dwell among green leaves. I do not believe he was ever in love with anything save a rose. Certainly he never hated anything but a weed. Of men he rarely makes a judgment, though he once remarked that gentlemen had one fault: "They won't do what they are told," a vice of which he is often the prey. Seeing little society that is not floral, his charity towards his fellows is exceeding great. He says, despite his knowledge of bees, "a man is as good as a bee, maybe," with all the air of one publishing a discovery

From "Rose Acre Papers"

THE FOUNTAIN

IT was a month when the sun was as a lion in the sky. . . . I was walking along the beach under a vertical sandcliff that shut out all the land except a fringe of heather over the edge. A fish could have breathed as well as I in the heat. There was no escape. The cliff could not be climbed and it extended as it seemed endlessly before and behind. The sea itself simmered in the heat as it touched the burning sand. There was not a bird, or a sail, or a cloud to be seen. I could not think or give up trying to think. The solitude was unbearable. There was no rest for body or mind. Sometimes I walked quickly to make an end, sometimes slowly in the hope that it would be less wearisome. As always happens when you reach an end which you have desired only because the approach is tedious, it was no better when I came at last to the place where the cliffs gave way to a level marsh. I meant to fling myself down among the gorse between the cliff and the marsh when I saw a girl. It was as if a fountain had leaped out of the sand.

She was standing not ten yards away with her face towards me but looking at the sea. She was dark, not tall, and slender, her eyes blue and cold and still. Her brow was like a half-moon under her brown hair and was of a most pellucid purity and utterly serene. The blue of her dress was very cool against the yellow of the gorse. She might have been eighteen, not more. Her hair was wet and fell down over her breast and beyond her waist in two long plaits. She had seaweed in both

her hands and it hung down to the ground motionless, like dripping bronze.

I thought at once of a fountain in a desert. The purple heather and yellow gorse were mistily and drowsily coloured and fragrant, and their fragrance and colour mingled and made one effect with the murmur of bees. My path lay within a yard of her, and I walked slowly up to her and past her, bathed in the freshness of her spirit. She moved a step or two forward that the interruption might be over more quickly.

My heart was beating fast, but not with hope. She was in another world from mine. I felt that there was no possible means of contact with that form and the life which it expressed.

Then I thought that if I were a sculptor I should be able to imprison something of that life in a bronze figure lying at full length but raised on its elbows so that the outline of the young breasts should not be lost, its chin upon the linked palms of both hands, presiding over the birth of a river at a spring of sombre diamond among the mountains. If a brook might attain in a human form the embodiment of its purity, coldness, light, power, and desire to be ever moving, of its mysterious transformations in clouds of heaven and in caves under the rocks, it would be in such a form as hers. The gravity, the dark simplicity, above all the exquisite combination of wildness and meekness in the girl would be worthy of the most sacred fountain, whether emerging among moss and crags and the shadows of crags or among sunlit grass. Surely, I thought, a lymph of crystal ran in her veins. It was the darkness of a hidden spring that chilled her pellucid brow. The radiance of her eyes, her face, her whole

form, was of the dawn, which I dreamed that she was one of the few left to worship—Yes! She had listened to the nightingales when the dew and the hawthorn flower and the young grass were yet dark; and the thrill of their songs had entered her eyes and lips without one passionate or confusing thought.

I fancied that I could see the way of her life. She was meek at home and in the company of others, as a large-eyed animal is meek but without surrender, or as a fairy bride was meek who consented in the old days to live with a mortal husband until he should have struck her three times, when she would forsake him and return with all the flocks and herds of her dowry to her father's palace below the lake in the hills. Only, this maid would not, like the fairy bride, laugh at a funeral, cry at a wedding; she would do all things in order, obeying in matters of the house and social life the father and mother and brothers and sisters who understood how such things should be, because it was for these that they lived. She would bound away in answer to a summons, especially if it sent her out into the air at night or in the very early morning, when she could see the stars sailing over broad blue fiords among the white clouds, or the moon like a silver fish now and then showing its side in the turbulence. And once away from these friends for whom she would easily wear away her life she was as if they were not. She plunged deep into the oblivion of other loves, as now when she looked out to sea.

I thought of her discovering one by one with serious joy the strange responses made to her heart by the earth and to the earth by her heart: how, for example, she would listen to the nightjar churring on the bough above

a house where all were asleep; or watch the owl gliding over the graves softly, beneficently; or, at first fearfully, then wild with delight, follow the fox that yelled his love and hate over the winter hills at night when all that remained of the world of day was the faint light here and there in the valley which one leaf could extinguish. She tasted unfamiliar leaves and fruit, buried her face in bracken or flowers or foliage for their scent, ran and leaped and lay in far places where the sun, the clouds, the stars, the rivers, the sea, the endless wind, were her company. Her whiteness, though it was not the same and was contrasted with her dark hair and flushing cheek, called to my mind the beauty of white on an October morning, the white of mushrooms in the short turf, of the horse-chestnuts' newly cloven husks, of the fresh walnuts opened and eaten where they fell, of the nearly full moon alone in the huge blue sky an hour after dawn. As a boy it was of such a being that I used to think—though my imagination was not energetic enough to body it forth quite clearly—when I felt, in loneliest places among the woods or clouds, that my footfalls had scared something shy, beautiful, and divine. And more than so, she was akin to the spirit abroad on many days that had awed or harassed me with loveliness—to the spirit on the dewy clovers, in the last star that hung like a bird of light scattering gold and silver from her wings in the cold blue and gloomy rose of the dawn; to the spirit in mountain or forest waters, in many unstained rivers, in all places where Nature had stung me with a sense of her own pure force, pure and without pity.

These were the fancies of the moment. She was in

sight for less than a minute as I went up from the sea over the moor, and when I turned in one of its hollows she had disappeared and I saw nothing but sea and sky, which were as one.

From "Rest and Unrest"

THE MOON

AS I could not sleep indoors, I thought I might be able to out of doors. The host and hostess were not yet in bed, so I told them of my plan and went out. The full moon was half-way up the sky behind a sheet of gauze here and there gathered into folds. It was as white as the few clouds about it in the low sky. The earth was a massive black island in space with lakes of moonblaze on the plains and mists of moonlit chalk on the hills amid the blackness. My road was a river of light that gave no light as it wound into black and out to white. And there, low down beneath me or high above, I saw light on a portion of the trunk of one tree only in the dark wood. Low down it was like a fire burning without a sound or a motion, and no figures of men around it. To express the mystery of it a man would have to use better fairies than were ever yet seen or, at any rate, depicted in book or poem. Those fairies would have to express the gaiety in what is solemn, a kind of comedy and even frivolity of law. In Rossetti's *Match with the Moon* there is too much of the man and too little of the moon, but it is a kind of beginning of what I want. I was a pure accident: there was no one whatever to see, and the moonlight was playing alone among the trees. If I had fancied it was playing for me and that I imagined the playing it would have been different. It would not have been the same if it had amused me: it was no more amusing than the majesty of the moon. I suppose I was near to imagining a deity with as little anthropomorphism as

possible, certainly without personification. This was the kind of play that makes the frost flowers on dead sticks in the woods on winter nights. It has a kind of divine prettiness, a holy trickiness as of an angelic columbine. But the solemnity had always the upper hand whether the white fire was at a tree-foot or nested just under the ripples of the wood surface.

I buried myself in a haycock not far from the trees and fell asleep thinking that the sky was a pool strewn with swansdown along the currents. The wash of waves among the reeds at the edges of the land was, I suppose, the unceasing rhythmless sound of wind in the trees. I awoke several times in the face of the same white moon and immense woods, seething always in the light continuous wind.

From "Cloud Castle and Other Papers"

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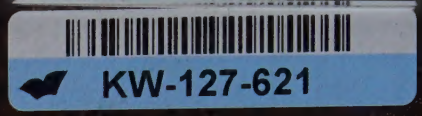
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